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## A Small Paper Boat

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Panel: At Language's Edge

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**Shenaz PATEL**

## **A Small Paper Boat**

A flow. A tide. An ebbing. Moving sands. Pebbles carried back and forth by trickling and patient waters.

That's what translation is to me.

Something shifting, forever unstable, challenging, desirable, and beautiful in this very instability.

I have two mother tongues, French and Creole. My mother and father brought me both languages as gifts when I was born. We spoke both at home. French, the colonisers' language, which outlived the British colonisation of Mauritius. And Creole, that marvellously hybrid language, born and raised in countries where colonisers, slaves, and later, indentured labourers, were thrown together by the violence of history, and had nevertheless to find a way to communicate.

I tried to fathom when we would shift from one to another: it was Creole for talking politics, or when we were angry, among other things! I also found out, when growing up, that Creole had few words to talk about matters of love. So much for history...and its aftereffects.

A language is not only a communication tool. It also reflects culture, how a population sees and conceives of itself and its surrounding world. In Chinese, the word "safe" is expressed by an ideogram representing a woman sitting under a roof.

A language is an ever-evolving thing. And Creole, to me, through its particular history of domination and survival, is an incredibly inventive language, full of vitality. Domination, though, is a tough-skinned thing. And even nowadays, in contemporary Mauritius, Creole still has to fight to establish itself as a "real language" not just a *patois*, not an inferior idiom.

We are a nation of immigrants. People came, or were brought in from, France and England, from Mozambique and Nigeria, from India and China, to make up our population. Today, regardless of their origins, nearly 90% of Mauritians indicate Creole as their mother tongue. And yet, English is the "official language," though it's a language that we don't really get to hear and use in our everyday life. So Mauritian children grow up using Creole, and then, when they go to school, they are taught everything in English, a totally foreign language for them. The result is ruthless: nearly 50% of children ages ten and eleven are thrown out of the education system at the end of the primary cycle.

For years, some educators and linguists in Mauritius have fought to make one thing heard: we don't have to oppose languages. They fertilise, irrigate, and enrich each other. And all the studies show that a child has a better chance of learning other languages if you value him in his mother tongue.

So the fight for us writers as well, has been to translate, and to create, in Creole. To create a body of texts. To show that Creole is as much a language as any other. One Mauritian writer has translated the whole of Shakespeare's plays into Creole. I translated a variety of things, going from a comic book like *Tintin* (which has been translated into more than 180 languages) to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (the height of abstraction!).

Today, a consensus has been reached on an official spelling; we have the first unilingual Creole dictionary in the world, and Creole has been introduced into our schools. Things are moving forward, slowly but surely.

When asked one day about my favorite word in Creole, I came up with the word *lakorite*. *Lakorite* is hard to translate. It's somewhere between "concord" and "unity," but then again, it's not that. It

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doesn't have the grandiloquence of these. Maybe it's just a way of telling about a kind of solidarity, of simple and serene

understanding and sharing between ordinary people. Language is a marker of culture.

The other day, I learned from my fellow writer Vladimir that there is a Bulgarian word for translating, the word *prevodach*, which is used as much for translating words and texts as it is to talk about things carried from one place to another.

I love this image, making of translators a kind of ferrymen (or women) smuggling across words and feelings, and emotions, and concepts, and ideas that in turn make the world.

I like the idea of language as an ongoing voyage across vast lands and unknown seas.